

*From the Darkness of Isolation to the Lightness of Being Seen:  
What Jewish Tradition Can Teach Us About Loneliness*

*Rabbi Claudia Kreiman*

*First Day Rosh Hashanah 5784*

In my sermon exactly a year ago, on the first day of Rosh Hashanah,<sup>1</sup> I spoke about a Steller's Sea Eagle, one of the rarest birds in the world. This particular eagle, which is native to Asia, was spotted in Massachusetts in the winter of 2022. It flew more than 5,000 miles across oceans and continents all by itself.

For nearly two years, bird chasers have been following the Steller's Sea Eagle's journey across North America, hoping to catch a glimpse of her. I am not a birder (in fact, I really don't know much about birds at all) but Rochelle, my assistant, does. So through Rochelle, I learn about birds and their journeys.

This past June, Rochelle was in Newfoundland and, amazingly, she spotted the Steller's Sea Eagle! I couldn't believe it. As a true birder, she got into a zodiac boat to spot her and she sent me these fabulous pictures her husband Motti, a photographer, took.

If you join the Facebook group "Steller's Sea Eagle Canada,"<sup>2</sup> which I'm now part of, you can keep track of where she is and see more pictures. She is still in Newfoundland and she is pretty spectacular. So big, so strong, so magnificent... and perhaps, at least in my mind, so lonely.

When I spoke about this magnificent bird last year, I focused on the uncertainty of her journey: being far away from all that she knew, her courage to fly in the midst of the unknown, and making a new home in this far away land and reality. This year, I am thinking about her and us in a different way. I am thinking about how lonely she likely feels, even while so many humans follow her across the globe.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.tbzbrookline.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/Rosh-Hashanah-Day1RCSermon5783.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/groups/553115519349566>

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As a society, we used to consider loneliness a feeling. Now, it is considered an epidemic. Surgeon General Dr. Vivek Murth has spoken widely about this. His report entitled “Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation” found that even before the COVID-19 pandemic, about half of U.S. adults reported experiencing measurable levels of loneliness. The report warned that the physical consequences of loneliness can be devastating: a 29% increased risk of heart disease; a 32% increased risk of stroke; and a 50% increased risk of developing dementia for older adults.

When TBZ member Dr. Katherine Gergen-Barnett published an op-ed for the *Globe*<sup>3</sup> earlier in the pandemic, she wrote:

Whereas the first phase of the pandemic focused our attention on state shutdowns, economic collapse, inadequate numbers of ventilators in hospitals, and front-line workers scrambling to secure enough personal protective equipment, we will likely have additional concerns during this second peak. This time, our lives will not only be marked by the rising death toll and economic uncertainty, but will also be coupled with the pervasive mental health toll that the coronavirus pandemic has taken. While there have been multiple studies on rising rates of depression and anxiety, there is another deeply pervasive and less highlighted public health menace on the rise: loneliness.

And now, three years after Katherine wrote this, we are learning to live with Covid, as much as we can, taking precautions when possible and when numbers are on the rise, like we are doing now with our windows open and our fans working, and constantly reminding people not to come if they are sick, and to vaccinate, and to wear masks if you were exposed. And that is our reality.

But are we also learning how to live with loneliness? Should we? Are we accepting that loneliness is the way forward?

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.bostonglobe.com/2020/11/23/opinion/we-cant-address-coronavirus-loneliness-alone/>

Nicholas Kristof recently wrote an op-ed<sup>4</sup> in which he explained how certain countries have appointed Ministers for Loneliness. Government positions that oversee initiatives to help people feel less lonely, less isolated, and more socially connected. Great Britain, Sweden, and Japan are three countries that have Ministers of Loneliness. I find it very compelling. And it also feels very Jewish.

In his book, *The Heart of Loneliness: How Jewish Wisdom Can Help you Cope and Find Comfort*, Rabbi Marc Katz writes: “Loneliness is the principal problem of human existence. It was there at the very beginning; our yearning for companionship is part of the fabric of the universe, woven into being alongside the other miracles of God’s hands.” Rabbi Katz also explains that not all loneliness is alike:

Studies have shown that there are two types of loneliness. The first, known as temporal loneliness, is short-term and situation specific. We all experience this time of loneliness many times in a given year. It is triggered by a big move, a new job, or the loss of a relationship. Our loneliness is tied directly to our circumstances. We are lonely because of something. The answer to this loneliness is to remove its source or replace it with another person or activity. Temporal loneliness is challenging but not overwhelming. Yes, it hurts a bit and seems daunting, but we trust it is not permanent. Yet for many this temporal loneliness can over time, turn into a chronic loneliness from which escape is much harder.<sup>5</sup>

Too many of us are in that place, for too long. You might be thinking, it is just you. But it is not. As a rabbi, I sit with so many of you and hear your stories of loneliness and depression, of hurt and fear. We also know that this epidemic is especially hard for our teenagers. And as technology progresses, as opportunities for virtual and meta life expands, our society creates more opportunities for loneliness to grow. Social media and technology, which are supposed to facilitate connections, actually make us feel disconnected from true relationships. These technologies make us feel as if we

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/09/06/opinion/loneliness-epidemic-solutions.html?searchResultPosition=1>

<sup>5</sup> *The Heart of Loneliness*, Rabbi Marc Katz

have lots of friends and as if we are involved in each other's lives, but much of it is a fallacy.

Let's differentiate between loneliness and aloneness. Rabbi Katz writes:

Being alone is not the same thing as being lonely. In fact, there's tremendous value in taking time away from others. For many, being alone provides space for creativity and self-reflection. Writers, artists, hikers, and gurus all spend a great deal of time alone. Being alone helps us better understand ourselves, providing a space for introspection. Rebbe Nachman of Breslov knew well the power of being alone. Nachman prescribed that we should all spend time alone in the wilderness, communing and literally speaking with God in a process known as *hitbodedut*. By going out alone into nature man would find comfort and holiness in solitude.

In the Genesis story, we are taught that God realized, once the first human was created, that it was not good for Adam to be alone<sup>6</sup>:

וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֱלֹהִים לֹא-טוֹב הָיִיתָ הָאָדָם לְבַדּוֹ אֶעֱשֶׂה-לּוֹ עֵזֶר כְּנֶגְדּוֹ

God said, "It is not good for the Human to be alone; I will make a fitting counterpart for him."

And though most of our traditional reading of this text and its explanations focus on the finding of a partner, I think that the concept of *לֹא-טוֹב הָיִיתָ הָאָדָם לְבַדּוֹ* (it is not good for humans to be alone) is at the core of our existence.

At my wedding, Rabbi Art Green spoke about this verse and asked a profound question: How did God know this? How did God know that it was not good for humans to be alone?

The question itself is profound. The answer: God was also lonely. God knew loneliness and for that reason God created the world and humanity. And God did not

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<sup>6</sup> Genesis 2:18

want us, the people, to suffer that same loneliness. God already knew that *hitbodedut* and deep cleaving to God's presence would not be enough. God knew that we needed each other, people, community, society, friendship, love, relationships.

Earlier this year, I heard a moving teaching by my dear friend and colleague Rabbi Ayelet Cohen, Dean of the Rabbinical school of JTS in New York, on the plague of darkness in the story of Exodus. Rabbi Cohen invited us to think about darkness not just as the simple meaning of the lack of light or the darkness of night or of a place without electricity, but darkness as an experience of isolation, of separation, of depression.

In Exodus 10:23 we read:

לֹא-רָאוּ אִישׁ אֶת-אָחִיו וְלֹא-קָמוּ אִישׁ מִתְּחַתְּיוֹ שְׁלֹשֶׁת יָמִים

People could not see one another, and for three days no one could move about.

The darkness was so thick that people could not see each other, could not find one another, could not move, and could not stand. The verse ends by telling us that this was not the case for the Israelites:

וְלִכְל־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל הָיָה אֹר בְּמוֹשְׁבֹתָם

but all the Israelites enjoyed light in their dwellings

Rabbi Katz, quoting a midrash,<sup>7</sup> explains: “our Rabbis understood that there was a unique pain in the plague of darkness. In their minds, this darkness was unlike the darkness that we often encounter in our everyday. It was a total darkness. Not only did it block sight, but it also blocked sound and movement.” He adds:

“Yet this soup-like darkness was not an instant problem. In fact, our Rabbis explain, the first few days of darkness were tolerable. For three days people could move about and while they could not see their fellow, they could certainly hear him and touch him. However, darkness usually

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<sup>7</sup> *Tanchuma Bo 2:2* [https://www.sefaria.org/Midrash\\_Tanchuma%2C\\_Bo.2.1?lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en](https://www.sefaria.org/Midrash_Tanchuma%2C_Bo.2.1?lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en)

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begets more darkness and after three days the air was so thick with blackness that it was oppressive. One could not sit or stand. Everyone was in their own isolation chamber, frozen in whatever place they were when the fog rolled in.”<sup>8</sup>

The commentary in *Etz Hayim*, the *chumash* or printed Torah with commentary that we use in our sanctuary, also suggests that this was not just a physical darkness:

Perhaps the plague was not a physical darkness, a sand-storm or a solar eclipse; perhaps it was a spiritual or psychological darkness, a deep depression.... Perhaps the Egyptians were depressed by the series of calamities that had struck them or by the realization of how much their own comfort depended on the enslavement of others. The person who cannot see his neighbor is incapable of spiritual growth, incapable of rising from where he is currently.<sup>9</sup>

I think many of us can relate to this image, this notion of thick darkness, isolation, and separation when experiencing loneliness, depression, or mental health struggles. Darkness is the incapacity to see, hear, or feel anything beyond the thick darkness; not being able to see others; and feeling that we are not seen by others.

I want to go back to the idea of countries creating the position of Minister of Loneliness. It reminds me of the Jewish concept of a *shomer* or *shomeret*. Jewish tradition teaches that after a person dies, it is the job of the *shomer* or *shomeret* (a guardian, caretaker, or watch-person) to comfort the deceased person’s soul before the burial.

What would it mean for each and every one of us to serve as a *Shomer* or *Shomeret* of Loneliness in the TBZ community and the broader world?

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<sup>8</sup> <https://www.rabbimarckatz.com/blog/2017/2/1/a-different-kind-of-darkness-parashat-bo>

<sup>9</sup> Page 377

It might mean learning the names of our neighbors. It might mean sitting with someone you don't know, someone who is not your usual person to hang out with during *kiddush*.

I want us to encourage us to stop in the street when we see someone in distress. I want us to check in with the person we haven't seen in a while. I want us to leave everything, when a friend calls for help, cancel the fun plans, to be there and cry with them, even if we don't have the answers. I want us to answer honestly when someone asks, "How are you doing?" Or to share, "I need help" or "I am lonely" even if we haven't been asked directly.

The fact that TBZ is thriving, that our sanctuary is full, that we have multiple events, all well-attended, every day at TBZ, is not enough. As Rabbi Katz writes: "Synagogues and other communities may feel as though they're doing a good job at building strong collective ties but attendance at events is not a fair indicator of whether the people who show up feel, ultimately as though they matter."

I am not criticizing us, I am challenging us to be even more intentional and to recognize that even in our wonderful, joyful, vibrant community, loneliness exists. And, I am not talking about just you, or even a few of you. I am talking about myself and each one of us. In moments of fear, sadness, depression, and loneliness, even I, who you know as strong, extroverted, surrounded by loving family and friends, need to reach out and allow others to take care of me. Life has taught me many lessons, the most important, which I take pride in, is to reach out in moments of darkness. My close friends can attest that in the moments of deep darkness, I call, I cry, and I ask to be held. And that is really what guides me to build intentional and meaningful communities. This is why at every *bar*, *bat*, and *b'mitzvah* I bless our children to always be part of meaningful and relevant communities.

There is a story in the Talmud of Rabbi Hanina visiting Rabbi Yohanan when he was ill. When Rabbi Hanina entered, he asked him: Are your afflictions dear to you? Rabbi Yohanan's answer is a courageous one. He answered, No – I welcome neither this suffering nor its reward. His brave and vulnerable answer allowed Rabbi Hanina to give him his hand and help him restore to health.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> *Talmud Bavli Brachot 5b*

The greatness of this story is that their relationship allowed for both honest questions and honest answers; it was from that depth of the relationship that Yochanan could feel less lonely, less ill, and stand up again, holding the hand of his friend.

The call of the shofar can be a reminder to allow ourselves to be vulnerable. Rabbi Art Green teaches:

The shofar sound represents prayer beyond words, an intensity of longing that can be articulated only in a wordless shout. But the order of the sounds, according to one old interpretation, contains the message in quite explicit terms. Each series of shofar blasts begins with *teki'ah*, a whole sound. It is followed by *shevarim*, a tripartite broken sound whose very name means “breakings.” “I started off whole,” the shofar speech says, “and I became broken.” Then follows a *teru'ah*, a staccato series of blast fragments, saying: “I was entirely smashed to pieces.” But each series has to end with a new *teki'ah*, promising wholeness once more. The shofar cries out a hundred times on Rosh Hashanah: “I was whole, I was broken, even smashed to bits, but I shall be whole again!”<sup>11</sup>

And though today we will not hear the shofar (we will hear it tomorrow), we will create space for the call of the shofar to remind us that in community, we can hear the brokenness of each of us and hope for some wholeness.

I learned from Rochelle that the Steller’s Sea Eagle that is wandering alone in Newfoundland is in an area of bald eagles who have been curious about her and there have been some friendly approaches. Scientists are hoping that she will mate with one of them and she won’t be alone. Perhaps, even in her grandiosity and magnificence, far away from the places she knows, some ministers of loneliness will help her find community and be less alone.

*Shana Tova.*

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<sup>11</sup> Arthur Green, *Seek my Face*, page 169